The happiest days of my life /

C.M. Sheldon

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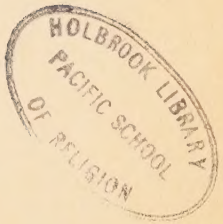
The Happiest Day of My Life



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The Happiest Day of My Life

A STORY

By Charles M. Sheldon
TOPEKA, KANSAS

FOREWORD BY
Bishop Theodore S. Henderson

A plain narrative told by the Reverend Philip Strong of the Church at Milton, Ohio, (or any other state.)

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FOREWORD

IT was a real privilege to me to read the story, "The Happiest Day of My Life," before it was printed, and a greater privilege to be asked to write a brief foreword to this edition. I believe so thoroughly in the central theme of the story that it is a great joy to me to commend this little booklet to all the pastors, not only of the Cincinnati Area of the Methodist Episcopal Church, but also those of churches of other sections and other communions.

I have long contended that no one can compute the value of the unused assets of the church in the men and women who might be (and should be) enlisted in the work of winning others to Christian discipleship. Any pastor who has had the experience of Philip Strong in helping any of his

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people to become personal workers for the Master will appreciate the feelings of the man who calls his story the record of the happiest day of his life.

As the booklet goes forth, my hope and prayer is that many of our ministers may have that happy experience of helping their people into this place of real partnership in service and the higher happiness of seeing the fruit of their labors in new disciples of Jesus Christ.

Theodore S. Henderson

The Happiest Day of My Life

I AM writing this story because I cannot help it. The event which I call the happiest day of my life (I mean my ministerial life) means so much to me that I want to share it with others. It was so unexpected, so unusual, so wonderful, that I cannot keep it to myself. Besides, the story, I hope is only the beginning of other stories that will be told by other ministers all over the world, for surely the experience I have had ought to be felt by every disciple of the Master.

My pastorate in Milton began fifteen years ago. I am not naming the denomination of my church, because it does not seem necessary. The thing that happened to me has nothing to do with the particular church to which I belong. Indeed the more I consider the conditions that prevail all over the United States the more I am convinced that the facts I am now about to relate about my pastorate might easily be duplicated in almost any

number of towns and parishes like mine. The main thing that interests me as I go on is the fact that the material in the churches is about the same, and the power that resides in them all is of astounding value, unused and latent, and even unknown but waiting to make new history for Christianity and the church. But I hope all this will be clear before I am through with my narrative.

The Sunday before the holidays—to be exact, on the 21st day of December, in the year of our Lord, 1924, I went into my pulpit a very much discouraged and, I am frank to say, disheartened man. Outwardly there was not the least reason for it. My church was considered the largest and most influential in the town. The membership was made up of the well-to-do citizens. The building in which they worshipped was large and beautiful. The choir was made up of expert singers, paid to render expert music. To be sure, we were carrying considerable indebtedness and were behind on our benevolent and missionary budget, but in that respect we were not peculiar, as hundreds of other churches in our state and in the country were doing the same thing. Outside

the church that morning were lined up at least one hundred automobiles, and inside the church sat their owners, as I have said, well fed, satisfied, well clad, good people. I knew that they, for the most part, respected me, and many of them had a genuine affection for me as pastor and friend. The fifteen years we had been together had strengthened many sacred ties that only a comparatively long pastorate could make possible. And taken altogether it would have been difficult for a stranger to understand the mental condition of the minister, that is, myself, as he went up into his pulpit and sat down, while the organ was playing, and the people still coming in, but the fact remains that I sat there poorly prepared to preach, although I had a carefully constructed sermon on the Christmas theme, taking for my text the words from the angel, "which shall be to all the people." "For behold I bring you good tidings of great joy."

O, yes, I had nearly forgotten that there was no apparent reason for my depression that morning on account of any financial or physical or family difficulty. My salary was not only comfortably adequate for my needs, but my people were gener-

ous beyond most. They had made me a present of a good car on the occasion of my last birthday, they were proposing to send me on a Mediterranean trip this next summer, they were in many ways a model parish. In my physical life I enjoyed remarkable health and was good for many years service. In my family life I was blest with a wife who had shared with me all the burdens and joys of home and church life. Our children were happily in school and college, and growing up with us in the church, and had never given us any real anxiety. If any minister had reason for contentment and a feeling of satisfaction with his position and with the future, certainly I ought to have been that man.

And yet, as I sat there that Sunday morning waiting for the organist to sound the chord for the Doxology and the beginning of the service for the people I was not a happy man nor a contented minister. I do not mean to say that I was pessimistic or bitter or ready to consider such a serious step as resigning from the ministry, but I was in no frame of mind to preach the Gospel, and I was actually an unhappy man, there in the pulpit, an

amazing revelation to my people, if they had only been able to read the mind of their pastor, outwardly decorous and placid, but inwardly wondering over many things, and almost desperate as he turned them over in his heart.

For, while it was a beautiful day, the galleries were empty, and as I looked over the congregation I could not count more than a score of children in the pews. We have a Sunday school membership of more than 500, but out of the entire number we never have had, except on special occasions, more than fifty of the young people at the morning preaching service. I suppose I ought to have been satisfied to have 500 children and young people enrolled in the Bible school. But somehow, as I looked around that morning, the Sunday before Christmas, I felt a longing for a crowd of young folks to whom I could preach, instead of or in addition to the same audience I had had for fifteen years of the same group of older people. Then I noted how few new faces there were in the pews, although our town, being a manufacturing place, has large increases in population every year, and strangers are plentiful on the streets,

and we read of them moving into the new apartment houses that have been building in the new suburb recently added to the town.

As I look back on that morning, the Sunday before Christmas, there was also another reason for my being an unhappy man and disheartened minister. I had just come back from the meeting of the National Federal Council at Atlanta, and the reports at that meeting had not been very encouraging. The council's noted evangelist, Dr. C. L. Goodell, tried to explain the drop in additions to the membership rolls of the Protestant churches of America by saying that it was partly due to the doctrinal discussions that had been going on, and partly to the constant denominational drives for money. His argument did not seem to me to be sufficient to account for the conditions that confronted the churches generally. Then in addition to the report of the evangelist, which to say the least was rather depressing, the man who reported for the rural churches in America declared that very many of them were feeble and without any atmosphere of worship or even religion, in spite of the outward activity and many wheels

going around in apparent service, which he said turned out very little valuable product, but made a loud noise, which was really only the sound of the cogs hitting one another as the wheels went around.

The organist's selection was a little longer than usual, played five minutes past 11 o'clock, which gave my disturbed mind a chance to turn over all these matters a little longer. But the organist is familiar with the habits of a certain group of our people who never get to church until after the Doxology, and they were coming in punctually late according to habit, as I sat there wondering if I would ever see the galleries filled or why my people needed to have so much preaching, after having heard my sermons for fifteen years, covering, as I vaguely thought it over, about every phase of the Christian life, so that I had really little to say, and must necessarily repeat the same old and eternal truths, to the same audience that had listened to them many times already. But when finally the organist began the Doxology, and I rose and the congregation with me, I think the one thing that stood out clearest in my perturbed mind was the desperate conviction I had that, after all,

my ministry had been a failure, because my church was standing still, and was a cold storage house instead of a power plant, and was well content with itself without much content in itself.

So far it does not look as if this particular Sunday before Christmas was going to be the happiest day of my life. But it was, and in a manner so unexpected and unforeseen that the wildest stretch of imagination could not have anticipated it. At least, there was nothing in my own past experience or ministry to suggest to me the slightest hint of what was going to make astonishing history for me and the church before the day was over.

It was while we were singing the second hymn, during which the congregation does not rise, that I noted a new face, a stranger, seated by the side of one of my members. Our pews are all free, of course, but my people have a habit of sitting in about the same places, and Andrew Evans always sits over on my right, about six pews from the platform. This morning he did not sing, but he sat there, looking strangely happy as he shared his hymn book with the stranger, a young man, whose face also struck me as bearing a reflection

of Andrew's, as if they were both feeling the same emotion.

We have a few of the old-fashioned hymns left in our book, and for some reason, which I do not even know now, the organist who selects the hymns under my direction, had changed the number on the bulletin and asked me to announce "Just As I Am, Without One Plea." I thought as he whispered to me to make the change it was unusual. Thinking it over ever since I have wondered if anything "happened" by any chance on that Sunday. At any rate the hymn was given out, and I thought as I sat there looking at Andrew Evans and his young man that the people were singing a little more generally than usual. It lightened up my spirit a little, so that when the time came for the sermon I got through it better than I had expected. I tried to emphasize the great fact that the angel's song that first Christmas day gave to the world the thought of a universal Savior. Not a Savior for the Jews or Greeks or Romans or Barbarians, but a Savior for ALL mankind, "ALL the people." For there is no respecter of persons with the Divine. Jesus is the Lord of all. And

as I warmed to my subject, I think I did rise above the depression that had followed me like a grim shadow into the pulpit, as it follows more than one of us in our ministry, for we are but men, after all, and not any supermen, yet there come times of spiritual exaltation, for which may glorious thanks be given to Him who Himself had to go off into the wilderness to rest awhile.

Andrew Evans is one of our merchants, owner of a grocery store—a very prosaic and unromantic business. He is just a plain, everyday, average man, not college bred, a member of the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary club, and our church. He lives out in a suburb in a comfortable house, and is an average citizen. I had never given Andrew any particular thought except as he was one of the steady and quiet men who could always be depended upon to do his share in the church when it came to the budget (he was one of ten men to pledge $5 a Sunday to the budget), and aside from that and the knowledge that he was a loyal attendant on the church services, I had never rated Andrew Evans above anything more than just a plain, common, everyday church

member. And yet, after all, that is saying a good deal more than we sometimes measure.

When the services were over I went down, as my custom is, and greeted the people as they came up front, for we have so many doors to the church that I cannot stand at all of them to meet the people as they go out. Several of my oldest members came up and spoke of the sermon as "fine", "a good one," "one of your best," "all right," and one said, "true." I welcomed this, as every minister does, not because I loved the praise of men, but because it helped me to believe I had not drawn the bow in vain. But gradually the people went out and I had turned to shake hands with our janitor, for we are the last two men to leave the church, after services, and the janitor and I are good friends and he sometimes strikes the key note of comment on the sermon, after the congregation has missed it. He did it this morning when he said, after wiping some furnace dust off his hands, "Pastor, that was a mighty good sermon. But instead of mentioning the Jews and Greeks and Barbarians, why didn't you say, 'janitors, and railroad men, and grocery men, and factory men,' and men

like Mr. Evans here? There aren't many Greeks and Romans in Milton, but lots of the other sort, if you are talking about 'all' sorts."

I had not seen Andrew Evans, as he had come up quietly and had been standing at the end of the platform behind one of the palm plants that hung over one corner. But when I turned around from greeting the janitor, he came forward with the young man who had been with him in his pew, and said, "Pastor, I want to introduce one of my clerks, Peter Burns. He wants to join the church!"

I think I must have looked my surprise. But I shook hands heartily with Peter, who appeared the same as hundreds of other young men I met on the street down town, only there was a light in his eye that was different. And then Andrew Evans said, with a little hesitation, as if he did not quite know how to express himself, "Could we see you in your study, Peter and I, for a little while, now?"

"By all means," I said, remembering that my wife was still in one of the Sunday school rooms with a Christmas committee. "Come right in." My study is a small room back of the choir room

and I use it mostly on Sunday mornings, to go over my bulletin and sermon.

We went in and I closed the door, and sat down. Andrew looked earnestly at me, and then with a kindling glance at Peter, he said,

"Do you remember, Pastor, one Sunday about five weeks ago you preached a sermon on 'The Biggest Business in the World?' "

"I remember it quite well," I answered, for it was one of the sermons that I had brooded over for months, and after preaching it, I could not find anything greater to preach about.

"In that sermon you spoke about the early disciples, all of whom, you said were disciple makers. Each Christian was eager to make another. That was the reason, you said, why Christianity grew so fast in the pagan world. And you said the modern church had lost the art of making disciples, and depended on professional evangelists and the ministers to make converts."

"Yes, I believe I did say that," I murmured. "You have remembered it very well. I wonder how many others have remembered it?"

"Well, I went home from hearing that sermon,

thinking it over, and I couldn't remember that I had ever made a disciple. I joined the church when I was eighteen, and I am fifty-six years old next week. Thirty-eight years I have called myself a disciple of Jesus, and I had never in all that time asked another man to be a Christian or talked to a man about the Christian life. I couldn't get rid of the feeling that I was a pretty poor sort of a Christian, didn't believe very much in my religion or really care much about Jesus, or I would be eager to have other people enjoy what I was enjoying. And the more I thought about it, the more I got worked up over it. I remember you said in that sermon that if any of your people wanted to make you happy at Christmas time they could not do it any better than by going out and making a disciple, and bringing him in here to the church. And that is just what I have done. Peter came into my store two weeks ago to take the place of one of my men who was hurt, and I talked to him and found he had never been a church member and that he had been brought up to believe, but had drifted away down here (his folks live out west), and was homesick

when I took him into the store, and he and I have had a good many talks about Jesus and His teaching. Peter wants to be baptized and unite with the church, and become one of us."

When Andrew Evans stopped, I believe I felt in my spirit an emotion that had been a stranger to it for many years. I looked across the little room at him, and he no longer looked like the commonplace grocery man I had known for fifteen years, but somehow he had the appearance of an angel of light, he was so transfigured to my sight. Then I felt something warm on my hand and rolling down my cheek, and found I was crying, the happiest tears I had shed since I began my ministry. My lips trembled so that I couldn't say anything, but up in my heart there welled like a wellspring of life something like the joy the angels feel when a sinner repents, and more than that, there was an exultant hope in my soul as I dimly groped into the possible future of my church and my people if men like Andrew Evans should begin to multiply, and begin to be disciple makers. What would the effect be on the church and the town and the world? It was such a

stupendous picture that I couldn't hold it steady very long, and as soon as I had swallowed the lump in my throat I found myself talking to Peter and asking him about his faith. He was timid at first, but we were so near in common experience of spiritual craving that in a short time he unrolled to me his heart, and told me his story. It was not different from thousands of others I had read about, but the main thing that swept over me like a wave of thanksgiving was the fact that Peter was soundly converted and had become a genuine lover of Jesus, and had already begun to talk to the other man in the store about his faith. He was a very ordinary looking young man. I would not turn to look twice at him if I met him down on the main street, and you would not either, but when he spoke of Jesus as his Redeemer his face shone. When had any of my people's faces shone like that? Their faith in Christ was so old and worn that the enthusiasm was burned out. But Peter had it, and I shall always believe he had it because of the way the message had been brought to him by Andrew Evans.

After we had talked together for a time I did

not count, I asked Peter when he wanted to join the church. He said he would like to come in next Sunday.

"I want to start the new year this way, if I can," he said "Before the old year is gone, I want to confess my Redeemer."

The rules of our denomination, I am thankful to say, are very simple when it comes to the reception of new members, and I was able to assure Peter that his name could be presented to the church at its next meeting, and he could be received into full membership on the last Sunday of the year.

"It will be communion Sunday," I told Peter. "The last Sunday of the year is always communion. But," I hesitated a minute, "I do not know of any others who are coming in on confession. There are some by letter from other churches."

"That will not make any difference to you, will it?" spoke up Andrew Evans. "What difference could it make?" asked Peter with a smile that made him look positively attractive.

There seemed to be a common understanding between us that there was only one way for us to close our meeting together. I asked Andrew if

he would pray a prayer of thanks to the heavenly Father, and it was not until I had asked him that I remembered that I had never heard him offer a prayer during all the years I had known him, although he had been a regular attendant on our prayer meetings. But he prayed a simple prayer that just talked to God as naturally as if He were really in the room. And then Peter prayed, eagerly and without self-consciousness, so real and full of human life that as I kneeled and listened I felt warm tears again running down my face. I know I was more agitated than either of the others. I could hardly find words to say what I felt, the whole thing had been so like an answer to prayer like a heavenly experience let down into a common everyday dull routine of my ministry. Yet in and through the entire time we were together in that little room my heart was singing praises, and my happiness was running over. I wondered if I could be the same man who had walked up into the pulpit only a little while ago, disheartened and discontented. It was a different world into which I went as I left that room, after a warm handclasp with Andrew and Peter, and it would

not be the same old world of the church if my exultant hope for it were to be realized, as I began to believe it would be.

Peter's name was presented in regular order to the church at its Christmas evening exercises Wednesday night. There was a large number of the members out, for one large part of the service consisted of a beautiful cantata given by our choir. It did not seem wise to me to say anything that night about the way Peter had made his decision to confess, but at the communion service the last Sunday of the year I found myself telling my people how it had happened that Peter Burns had become one of us. I believe the Holy Spirit gave me the right words to say so that nothing was said amiss, and when I baptized Peter it seemed to me that the Spirit came into the building so truly that everyone felt His presence. I have never known the people to be so affected. As the communion service went on, I could note heads bowed that were not usually bowed, and when we sang the second hymn, "Where He Leads Me, I Will Follow; I'll Go With Him All the Way," I noted something I had never seen in my church

before—tears on certain people's faces. In fifteen years I could not remember seeing some of my people moved with any such emotion. The whole service seemed to be a-tremble with divine possibilities, and when it closed the people sat silent for so long that I feared to dismiss them with the regular set benediction. It seemed to me that there should be some other way, or as if they ought to rise and go out with no more human word.

All that was a week ago. I am writing this account on Monday, the 5th of January, the year of our Lord, 1925. Yesterday was a wonderful day in our church. It is not possible for me now to tell what made it so different from the Sunday of two weeks ago. But I am looking into this new year with a hope and an enthusiasm I have never known, even in the early days of my ministry. And at the heart of all my feeling stands Peter, a disciple made by Andrew, a disciple. Already I seem to feel a change coming over the membership of my church. Surely it was not because of any special effort to provide a more attractive program that we had more people in the congregation than I have seen for years. It was something

deeper than man-made programs of church services. The Holy Spirit has come to us. Peter was there sitting with Andrew Evans, and he had two young men with him. He introduced them to me at the close of the service, and said they had promised to come regularly. My people were respective to my message as I have never seen them. I ventured to do what I have never done before in all my ministry—I asked the people to remain after the sermon and pray for the greatest year in the history of the church. I am not able at this writing to describe that after meeting. The entire congregation stayed. I was simply astounded by the number of prayers that were offered, prayers that revealed to me a hunger for the spirit of God, prayers for consecration and prayers for new life. It seemed to me yesterday morning that for the first time in our church history we had confronted the divine Presence and were living in the atmosphere of the other world.

At the close of the prayer hour I placed on the hearts of all my people the wonderful power of making disciples. I quoted the remark of one of the members to me, made after the communion

service. He said: "Pastor, I am ashamed to say I don't have the courage to go to a business friend or to any man who is not a church member and talk to him about religion, on account of my own imperfect Christian life. He knows me too well."

But I said to him that a man does not have to be perfect to ask a man who was looking down at the ground to look up at a star, or tell a man who was lost how to find the way home. The early disciples were not perfect men by any means, but they could bring others to Jesus. And it seemed to me that any member of the church who really loved Jesus, and was trying to follow Him, could go and make disciples. If every member did that this year, we would not be able to house the people. I spoke of the recent religious census that had been taken in Milton, and the figures showed that there were more than 10,000 human beings who did not belong to any church or ever go into one. We did not have to go to foreign lands to preach the gospel, the people of other lands were within our gates. I spoke of the astonishing day that would dawn on the church when every church member became a disciple maker, and said it

would make a new chapter of history in the wonderful life of Christ among men. And I urged my people to make this trial of their faith, and put it to the test, and not be afraid of telling the old, old story of Jesus and His love.

Since that morning I have been living in an atmosphere of expectant hope. How many of my people will actually try to make disciples I do not know. I can count on two that I am sure of, and those two are Andrew and Peter. Indeed, after yesterday's meeting they came up and promised to bring others. Peter made me think of how the early disciples must have looked. He is the most emotionally enthusiastic Christian I have ever met. But he did not seem to me to be morbid or narrow or fanatical or disagreeable about it.

And so, I am waiting, and hoping and longing and praying for the most wonderful year of my ministry. I find myself already, on this Monday after the first Sunday of the new year, more than once obliged to kneel in prayer. I had planned ahead for a sermon to deliver on January 11; but I have had to abandon that plan. I wonder how many sermons I have manufactured during the

last fifteeen years out of other people's writings? Some of them were good, I know, and helped my people. Yet this morning I do not feel contented with them. I want something deeper and higher. And I find myself asking the Spirit of God to come into my heart, and for His power to descend on my church and baptize it with something more than programs and social diversions. O, I pray Thee, Mighty Spirit of the living God, as Thou hast given me the happiest day of my life already, in the sight of Peter made a disciple by Andrew, grant me the happiest year of our lives because we have been born again into the old Christian faith. And may it be possible, O Eternal Power, that over the entire church of every name that calls Thee Lord, there may come a revival that shall cause the members to go out into the highways and compel to come in to the feast of God's Son, those who have never had the invitation. Make disciple makers out of Thy disciples, O Lord, all through this year of Thine, this year that may be marked by another historical Pentecost, that shall make new history for the whole world. Amen.

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C.M. Sheldon

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